DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 186 975 CS 502 942

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TITLE Exercises for Beginning and Group Interpretation Courses.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (71st, Ocean City, MD, April 24-26, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Class Activities; Dramatics; Higher Education; *Narration; *Oral Interpretation; Oral Language; *Poetry; *Story Telling; Teaching Methods; *Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Oral Literature

ABSTRACT

Composing oral poems and storytelling are two exercises that speech teachers can use in oral interpretation courses. Conducting the oral poetry exercise early in an introductory interpretation course allows students to become acquainted with each other and to encourage each other while sharing something of themselves with the entire class. This exercise begins with an introduction to the oral tradition and examples of the oral tradition in popular culture. After the teacher composes an oral poem for the class while some of the students record the poem as it is composed, the class discusses aspects of the oral tradition further. Then the teacher's poem is recomposed, comparing the similarities and differences of the two versions. Subsequently, all the students get opportunities to compose and record oral poems. A second exercise, one that can be used in classes on chamber theatre, is storytelling--performing as a narrator while other class members act out the parts of the story's characters. This exercise promotes a discussion of the differences in narrative control, narrative attitudes, and the relationships between the narrator, the audience, and the scene. (RL)

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EXERCISES FOR BEGINNING AND GROUP INTERPRETATION COURSES

by

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(1) Oral Poetry in the Beginning Interpretation Course

(2) Storytelling as a Method of Teaching Chamber Theatre

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Oral Poetry in the Beginning Interpretation Course

The course outline that I use for the introductory course in Interpretation begins with a summary of the oral tradition of literature followed by a poetry unit. In the past the summary of the oral tradition has been a kind of history lesson which, judging from the notes that the students took, was at least recorded by a majority of the class. However, I felt that the lesson was weak because it lacked a practical application to the students' performances. My initial objective in developing the exercise which follows was for the students to experience the oral composition of literature; as I employed the exercise, I discovered that the students were also practically applying many of the elements of poetry. In this paper I will first outline the exercise that I developed, then describe methods for implementing it, and finally discuss its results and advantages.

After introducing the oral tradition of literature and supporting with examples the contemporary presence of the oral tradition, I compose an oral poem for the class. I ask two students to act as scribes to record the poem as I compose it. Then after an interval during which the class continues to discuss aspects of the oral tradition, I recompose my poem. Between the two acts of composition there is no discussion of the first poem. As I recompose the poem I retain the central idea, but I do not attempt to make the second duplicate the first. After the second composition, the scribes compare the two with help from the class. They compare the words of the

two texts, the phrasing, punctuation, and tonal changes that have occurred in the two performances. I then ask for someone in the class to volunteer to compose a poem of his own. Students remain in their seats while composing their poems and scribes are not used. Eventually everyone in the class has the opportunity to volunteer or is asked to compose a poem. After each poem I guide the class through questions to observe the structure or the tone of the poem; without evaluating, I make a comment of encouragement or appreciation for the poet's contribution. At the conclusion of the exercise, I summarize the observations that the class has made about the poems.

When I ask for the first volunteer there is usually a hesitation, a silence. The silence is not a negative response or a barrier which I fear as a teacher. It is true that some individuals are overcome by the prospect of composing a poem spontaneously; others are thoughtful. I look for the thoughtful faces. If a volunteer does not emerge after a couple of minutes of silence followed by a few words of coaxing, I ask an individual with a thoughtful face if he will share his poem with us. There is something exciting about composing an oral poem and I do not have to look for long to find an adventurer who is on the edge of inspiration.

There are essentially two ways that I assist a student who has an idea but is hesitant to begin. The first method is to encourage the individual to say his first line, telling him that I will help with the next line if he needs assistance. If it is necessary, I help by asking questions based upon what he has already said. The question may be: "And then what did you do?" or "How does that make you feel?" Spontaneity produces some lines that express genuine feeling. If a student does not have a first line, I encourage

him to continue thinking, reminding him that the muse is at times finicky in choosing her moments for lending us inspiration. I return to that student later in the exercise.

For the discussion of each of the poems I listen for parallel structures, sound patterning, rhyme, imagery, lists, and phrase units indicating line lengths. These are essentially oral elements in poetry, the ways in which oral poems are remembered. Combinations of these elements are present in each of the oral compositions of the students. Their poems are short, usually one sentence long; but the sentences are broken into speech phrases, a form of patterning employed in free verse. While most of the poems tend to be serious in tone, several are usually humorous. It is profitable to contrast the humorous with the serious poems, comparing tone and structure with particular attention to the use of rhyme and sound patterns. The serious poems are usually delivered in low, centered voices without strained high pitches. Pauses in both the serious and humorous poems are filled with meaning. They contain emotional responses to what has just been said and the thought of what is to come next. I call attention to the significance of the pauses and their rhythm, reinforcing this in view of future assignments when the students will read the poetry of another author.

The class is attentive to the poems; laughter comes with my comments between the poems. We discuss why the audience was so quiet during the serious poems. It is important for the students to realize that the quiet was motivated only in part by politeness; politeness alone would not be enough without the power of each poet to hold his audience's attention through the intensity of his feeling and through the process of his thinking.

Because I use this exercise on either the first or second day of class, it has the further benefit of allowing students to become acquainted with and encourage each other, and to share something of themselves.

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Storytelling as a Method of Teaching Chamber Theatre

In the book Chamber Theatre and in an earlier article "Chamber Theatre," published in the Illinois Speech and Theatre Journal, Robert S. Breen has discussed the significance of the storyteller's opening words, "Once upon a time." Breen has explained that these words transport the imagination of the listener from the time and place of the telling to that of the story.[1] While focusing upon the written prose fiction text, Breen's works imply the close relationship between storytelling and Chamber Theatre. Developed by Breen, Chamber Theatre is a technique for staging prose fiction which brings to life the action of storytelling inherent in the written prose text.

As a teacher of beginning and group interpretation courses, I use storytelling as a way of introducing prose fiction and Chamber Theatre. The objective of my exercises is to develop the student's awareness of the storyteller's or narrator's role. In my opinion that role is to be the active inventor and controller of the story. My exercises provide students with the practical experience of creating the form of a story, developing a point of view, creating scenes with dialogue, and telling the story to an audience. Breen has explained that Chamber Theatre originally began as a classroom exercise to help students develop the ability to read passages of narration with the vitality and fullness of character that they had when reading passages of dialogue.[2] Derived from his idea, the exercises that

I use combine a group storytelling experience with an adaptation of Viola Spolin's "storytelling exercise" from Improvisation for the Theatre.[3] In this paper I will outline the method for the exercises, discuss how the exercises are implemented, and examine some of the directions which the resulting class discussion can take. In addition, I will explain the differences between my exercises and Spolin's.

The method that I use has two parts: first the class invents a story and then the class enacts it. To begin we arrange our desks in a circle. I begin the story myself, introducing a major character, establishing a set of existing circumstances, and giving a motivation for change. At my direction, which is at times sudden, the role of storyteller is passed at random from one member of the group to another. Each storyteller adds a description or an event to the story. Developing a narrative line in this manner challenges the creativity of each individual. It also helps to tie the group together and generates some imaginative ideas in a friendly atmosphere. However, the story that the group produces lacks form. Its episodes are vaguely connected, summary predominates, the conclusion is contrived, and the story lacks a unifying element. At this point the story needs unity, focus, and artistic control. There are several possible sources of unity that could be explored, for instance a unity of language, a unity of spectacle, or a unity of objective. The first two possibilities are not feasible because the classroom setting, the students' abilities, and the time allowed are limited. Peter Brook can establish a unity of spectacle, but he is a professional with resources considerably beyond those of our classroom.

From my experience, the most satisfying way for beginning students to establish unity for their story is to establish the main character's objective,

or in Stanislavskian terms his "super objective." In other words through class discussion, we establish for the main character a basic want or need; then we establish something that opposes that need, a conflict. Next we outline the action of the story: how does it begin, what are the sequences of the action, how does the story conclude. Each part of the story is related to the central idea of the main character's objective. When the students have developed a beginning, a middle, and an end for their story, they are ready to proceed. The story is now an outline; it is not a specific text. In the next part of the exercise each narrator or storyteller will have the freedom to tell the story in his own style. To give the storytellers time to become familiar with the text, we begin the next step on a new day of class.

The second part of my method is indebted to Spolin's exercise. One student is designated as the storyteller; he narrates the story on stage, while the other students become the characters and follow his directions. In our classroom a simple set of chairs and desks become the necessary props. The storyteller begins his narrative in the center of the stage and is free to move between audience and scene. I instruct him that as a storyteller he is the director of the story's enactment. I explain to him that as he tells the story, he is responsible for establishing the situation, the atmosphere, the movements of the characters, and their motivations, and for coaching the verbal and emotional responses of the characters. He is told that he must incorporate into the narrative any directions that he has for a character's response to a situation. If the storyteller is unhappy with a character's delivery of dialogue, physical behavior, or emotional response, he may physically move the character or he may add to his narrative further helpful description. However, he may not interrupt the narrative

to coach an actor in a director's voice. Speaking as director, he would break the illusion of the story. For example, if the story were about a miser, the narrator might allow the character to speak his own words of love to his gold. However, if the character responded by muttering with little feeling, "Oh my gold," the narrator could counter by saying, "the miser was passionate as he addressed his gold," cuing the character to speak again. The narrator would continue in this manner until the character addressed his gold with the amount of emotion that the narrator desired. In contrast, the narrator could not interrupt his story to say, "Joe, speak your lines with more emotion."

Repeating the story with more than one narrator gives the class the opportunity to compare changes in narrative attitude and differences in the relationships between the narrators and their audience, scenes, or characters. My instructions to subsequent narrators are intended to promote such comparison. If the first narrator had fed the characters specific lines, I would tell the second narrator to let the characters invent their own. To use the miser once again, if the first narrator had said, "the miser ran his fingers through the gold coins muttering, 'Oh, my beautiful, precious gold, how I love you,'" I would advise the next narrator to give the character more freedom. The next narrator might for instance say, "the miser ran his fingers through the gold coins muttering words of love," and cue the character to speak. If the first narrator had controlled every action of the characters, I would advise the second to allow the characters more latitude. If conversely, the first narrator had allowed the characters freedom in action and dialogue,I would ask the second to strongly control dialogue and to physically direct action. As time permits, instructions

for each narrator can be changed. As an alternative, a narrator can be told to cast himself as the major character or as a minor character, and to tell his story from that point of view. A narrator can also be instructed to establish closer contact with the audience or with the characters in a scene.

During an enactment, I assume the roles of audience member and coach. When the narrator has forgotten to solve the specific narrative problem that I have given him, I remind him of his tasks.

For those of you who are familiar with Viola Spolin's work, there are some significant ways in which my adaptation differs from her original exercise. She advises the storyteller to take "his place at the side of the stage" and to stay there. This instruction I have changed to match Breen's advice that the narrator of Chamber Theatre begin his story in the center of the stage and be allowed the freedom to move between scene and audience. Spolin also warns that the storyteller should allow freedom of action and lines for the characters. These instructions, if followed alone, would lead to a limited exploration of the possible relationships between the narrator and his characters. Central to the study of point of view is the realization that the amount of freedom allowed characters to express themselves differs from one narrator to another, and is a distinguishing trait of a particular narrator's style. Therefore, as my instructions to the narrators indicate, I encourage each narrator to explore relationships between himself and his characters which are at times in variance with Spolin's suggestions.

After several narrators have had an opportunity to tell and direct the story, the class observes how the role of narrator has changed with each telling. We consider the extent to which each storyteller or narrator adhered

to the established objectives of the major character. We also explore how each narrator's method revealed the character's objective, and we discuss the distinguishing narrative traits for each telling of the story. The enactments illustrate the narrator in action moving his focus and body between audience and scene. The exercise opens a discussion of the differences in narrative control, in narrator relationships with the audience and the scene, and in narrative attitude.

[1]*Chamber Theatre* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 1; "Chamber Theatre," *Illinois Speech and Theatre Journal*, 26 (1972), 20.

[2]"Chamber Theatre," unpublished manuscript, copyright Evanston, Illinois, 1964. Mimeographed.

[3]*Improvisation for the Theatre: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 312-14.